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*Brief History  
of  
Rainsford  
Island*

*Boston*

—

*1915*





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OF THE  
CITY OF BOSTON  
George F. Clark  
5587.24

# Rainsford Island

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## A BRIEF HISTORY

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FOREWORD.— This brief History is the result of facts gleaned from “King’s Handbook of Boston Harbor”; from Dr. Edward M. Hartwell’s town records, and from the headstones marking the graves of many former inhabitants of this pleasant little island. Added to by the editor of “The Leader,” in 1902. Revised, with additions, in 1915.

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**R**AINSFORD ISLAND, situated between Long Island and Peddocks, and directly opposite George’s, on which is Fort Warren, is about seven miles from Boston. About 1636, at the request of Owen Rowe of London, to Governor Winthrop, this island was granted to Elder Edward Rainsford “to keepe my cattle, that so my stocke may be preserved.” Mr. Rainsford was the first ruling elder of the Old South Church, a large landholder on Long Island, and one of the substantial men of the Colony. The story is that, although he came from good English stock — his brother, Sir Richard Rainsford, was Lord Chief Justice of the King’s bench — he was disarmed by the colonial authorities, in 1637, for heresy. It is claimed that although given the island he paid its Indian owners, “preferring a just title to one founded on the right of might.” He died in 1682. His wife died in 1688. Both are interred in King’s Chapel Burying-ground. The property passed through many hands, until, in 1737, Boston bought it of the Lorings of Hull, for £570, “to be used and improved for a publick hospital for the reception and accommodation of such sick and infectious persons as shall be sent there by order.” A hospital was erected, and Rainsford’s Island was used as a quarantine station under the joint control of town and colony until 1852.

In 1763 a bill of £18 1s. for a meal enjoyed on Rainsford’s Island was rendered to the Boston Selectmen. The specie value of this bill was £2 8s. 1½ d. Dr. Edward M. Hartwell’s town records tells

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us : "The Selectmen being at Rainsford's Island to view the Hospital, *Voted*, to allow Capt. Brace of the Briggandine Polly, just arrived from Bristol with a case of Small Pox aboard, to come up the harbour after dropping his sick hand and his bedding, clothing and the like, at the island."

In 1777, after an epidemic of small-pox raged through the Colony, spread by people visiting an infected ship, the order was given that all infected vessels be sent to Hospital Island, as Rainsford was then called.

In 1778, Ezekiel Price tells us, in his diary, that on Sept. 2, he went down the harbor to Hospital Island, with the Selectmen and other Boston gentlemen, and "had a view of the French fleet then in the harbour, as well as those stationed in Nantasket Harbour ; they made a very formidable appearance, and were disposed so as to protect us from any approach of the British Navy."

Nearly a century ago, the sweet singer of the harbor thus apostrophized "Rainsford's pleasant little isle" : —

"The sailor here when dire disease  
His body has opprest ;  
May lie upon the bed of ease,  
With kind attentions blest.


"Here Welch, the son of healing art,  
Will due prescriptions give :  
And use each mean to soothe the heart,  
And make the sufferer live.

"Here sprightly youth may exercise,  
Upon the bowling green ;  
When no rude storms deform the skies,  
And nature shines serene.

"Long may the legislative care,  
Thy kind protection be ;  
And long may Mercy's hand prepare,  
Her dwelling-place in thee."

In the cemetery on the West head of the island one stone, that of Ithamer Ward, bears the date 1749. This is twelve years after Boston bought the Island from the Loring's for a hospital. No doubt but that graves antedate the stone found. In this cemetery are buried most of the old keepers of the island ; among whom were Henry and Thomas Spear, father and son, buried late in the eighteenth century, and many sailors and officers of foreign ships, also many ex-soldiers, Massachusetts veterans of the Civil War, who died here where they were living on the cold bread of municipal charity. It was the custom, too, for Boston families to send their members, when taken with dangerous infectious diseases, to the

Island, whence many never returned. Some interesting inscriptions are carved upon the rocks and stones around and in this cemetery. A few are given here : —

*Near by these gray rocks*  
 *Enclos'd in a box,*  
*Lies hatter Cox,*  
*Who died of smallpox.*

Close to this are the following trite proverbs : —

*Stones tell tales.*  
*Time draws teeth.*  
*Seek and find.*

*Specta mentem, non frontem hominis, nam,*  
*Verumdecus, est, positum, in virtute.*  
*Insula Rupes. A.D. 1835.*

Translation of above : —

“Look to the mind [character] of the man, not his appearance ; for true worth consists in virtue.

“Rocky Island, A.D. 1835.”

Two Greek words we would translate : “I utter a moral. I have graved it on this stone. Think on't.”

In 1819, on Great Head or North Bluff, the Old Mansion House, now known as the Superintendent's house, was built. This was the chief summer resort in the harbor for a number of years, as the keepers of the island were given permission by the town fathers to take boarders when no infectious diseases were upon the Island.

In 1832, on the West Bluff overlooking the cemetery, was erected the Small-pox hospital, an imposing Greek temple, of stone. Dr. J. V. C. Smith was then Port Physician. This building has since been used for an Infants' Summer Hospital, and later for the small boys sent to the Suffolk School for Boys.

In 1852, the State took possession of Rainsford Island for a pauper colony, and spent about \$100,000 in buildings and improvements. In 1866 the inmates went to the inland almshouses.

In 1872, Boston bought the Island, and all its buildings, for \$40,000, and the large hospital now known as the institution building was converted into a city almshouse.

In 1882, when the City of Boston purchased Long Island, the male paupers were removed to Long Island and the female inmates of the almshouse at Austin Farm were transferred to Rainsford

Island, where they remained until 1895, going at that time to Long Island.

The first Overseer was Capt. Eben Seaver, who came here from Deer Island in 1872, and held the position until his death in 1879. A daughter was born to Mr. and Mrs. Seaver on the Island, who was named Carrie Rainsford Seaver. Following Capt. Seaver the following acted as Overseers at different times: Col. John C. Whiton, Col. Guy C. Underwood, and Capt. James R. Gerrish.

Previous to 1895 boys committed by the Courts for misdemeanors were sent to Deer Island, where also were housed the men and women criminals. The Institution, a part of the Public Institutions Department, was known as the House of Reformation, and governed by three Commissioners. In 1895 Dr. Thomas L. Jenks, Mr. Edwin L. Pillsbury, and Mr. John D. Berran being the Commissioners, the transfer of the Institution from Deer Island to Rainsford Island was executed.

About July, 1895, the Institutions Department was re-organized and placed in charge of one Commissioner. Dr. Alfred B. Heath served until the end of October, 1896. Mr. Ernest C. Marshall succeeded him, and had control of the House of Reformation until June, 1897, when it became a part of the Children's Institutions Department, under a Board of Trustees consisting of seven members.

The following-named gentlemen and ladies constituted the first Board of Trustees appointed in June, 1897:—

Mr. Horatio A. Lamb, Dr. Charles P. Putnam, Mrs. William J. Quinn, Mr. Charles V. Dasey, Mrs. Davis R. Dewey, Miss Emily G. Balch, Mr. John O'Hare.

Of the original Board Mr. John O'Hare still remains.

Trustees have been appointed and served as follows:—

Mr. HORATIO A. LAMB . . . . .	1897—1902
Dr. CHARLES P. PUTNAM . . . . .	1897—1911
Mrs. WILLIAM J. QUINN . . . . .	1897—1899
Mr. CHARLES V. DASEY . . . . .	1897—1899
Mrs. DAVIS R. DEWEY . . . . .	1897—1899
Miss EMILY G. BALCH . . . . .	1897—1898
Mr. JOHN O'HARE . . . . .	1897—
Miss HELEN CHEEVER . . . . .	1898—1903
Mrs. G. F. H. MURRAY . . . . .	1899—1908
Mr. JOHN A. BRUEN . . . . .	1899—1900
Miss ELLEN H. BAILEY . . . . .	1899—1904
Mr. LEE M. FRIEDMAN . . . . .	1900—1910
Dr. HASKET DERBY . . . . .	1902—1909
Mr. J. C. PELLETIER . . . . .	1903—1905
Dr. ELIZABETH C. KELLER . . . . .	1904—1905

Mr. JAMES P. CLEARY . . . . .	1905—1915
Miss MARY BOYLE O'REILLY . . . .	1905—1911
Mrs. CAROLINE S. ATHERTON . . . .	1908—1912
Mrs. RACHEL SHERMAN THORNDIKE,	1909—1910
Mr. LOUIS A. GINSBURG . . . . .	1910—
Mr. JOHN F. CRONIN . . . . .	1910—1912
Mr. JAMES J. BACIGALUPO . . . . .	1911—
Miss ELIZABETH M. NEEDHAM . . . .	1911—
Mr. MICHAEL J. JORDAN . . . . .	1912—1914
Miss MARGARET FOLEY . . . . .	1912—
Dr. ISAAC ROSENBERG . . . . .	1914—
Mr. JAMES P. MURPHY . . . . .	1915—

The following-named Superintendents have served :—

Gen. M. T. DONOHUE . . . . .	Died soon after the Institution was established here.
LORENZO D. PERKINS . . . . .	June 1, 1895, to Jan. 2, 1899.
JOHN C. ANTHONY . . . . .	Jan. 2, 1899, to Sept. 30, 1899.
SUMNER D. SEAVEY . . . . .	Oct. 1, 1899, to Sept. 1, 1910.
Dr. CHARLES A. RABETHGE . . . . .	Sept. 1, 1910, to Sept. 1, 1911.
JOHN J. RYAN . . . . .	Sept. 1, 1911, to — — —

In 1906 the House of Reformation became the Suffolk School for Boys, by a vote of the Board of Trustees, permission having been granted by the Legislature March 9, 1906.

This is solely a Juvenile Institution, to which boys are sentenced during their minority for various misdemeanors.

Today one may fairly say that no boy is committed to the Suffolk School because he has been guilty of any particular offence for which he appeared in Court at the time of his commitment. The Courts in Boston have a well-established system of probation which is used in almost every case before more stringent means of reformation are employed. It is only when repeated offences convince the Court that the boy should be subjected to a more rigid discipline than can be administered under the boy's then present condition, that a boy is sent to the Suffolk School. He is then not sent as a criminal for reformation, but rather as a child who needs special attention in the formation and building of character and habits, to fit him to occupy a useful place in the community. The School is, so to speak, a moral hospital for the curing and up-building of the moral condition of the boy, just as an ordinary hospital caters to the physical needs of the sick. The full sentence is seldom if ever served, as under the merit system now in operation the boys can, if so inclined, earn their release in less than a year. If demerited their time of service increases until the requisite number of merits are earned. They attend school daily, with the ordinary vacations, and many



of them have the opportunity to work at such industries as Printing, Shoemaking, Sewing, Sloyd, Farming, Painting, Carpentry, Cabinet-making, Laundry, and general labor.

When the authorities in power at the time of the removal of this Institution looked over this Island in 1895 they found buildings but poorly adapted to the needs of a Reform School, and much work had to be done then to put them in condition for actual service. The two great storms of November, 1898, and December, 1909, did not improve matters, as thousands of dollars worth of damage was done each time. Many buildings and the wharf had to be immediately repaired, and a great deal more work remained to be subsequently taken care of as opportunity offered. Some time elapsed before all trace of the ravages of the two storms had been removed.

Gradually important changes have been made and many improvements have been effected in the last few years, and many are still contemplated. The room in the main Institution building, used for the Printing Office, has been enlarged and remodeled, and is better lighted and pleasanter than ever. The same may be said of the Sewing-room. The Shoe-shop has been nearly doubled in size, and new and improved machinery installed. The Play-room has been enlarged, containing now a third more floor-space, and probably double the air space, by taking in that part of the upper story formerly occupied as a Sloyd-room. A new Ice-house, a new School-building containing three school-rooms, and a new brick Stable have been built. A wide vestibule has lately been completed, connecting the School-rooms with the main Institution buildings. Other buildings have been remodeled, including one for a new Sloyd-shop. A Carpenter and Cabinet Shop, also a Laundry have been recently installed. All have been freshened up occasionally with coats of paint and whitewash. A new cement piggery and hennery is nearly completed. An old cottage, used many years ago as the headquarters of the Port Physician, was demolished in 1900, as its usefulness had long since departed, and it was an unsightly object. An Electric-light service has been installed, constituting an invaluable improvement. All the industrial departments receive their power from the Electric plant.

The grounds and roadways are kept in good condition. The Farm yields abundantly considering its limited area and naturally poor soil. Many years ago Cherry and Peach trees flourished here. Now the Apple and Pear are the only fruit trees remaining. The hill is abundantly covered with shade trees of many years' growth. New shade trees have been set out lately along the avenues.

In 1899 the building which had been used during the four previous years for the Infants' Summer Hospital was transferred to the control of the Trustees for Children, and has since been used for the smaller boys of the Suffolk School for Boys. It is now known as "Point Cottage." This building has recently been remodelled, and is now an up-to-date cottage in every particular.

We are connected with the main land by telephone. The Metropolitan water system furnishes water for the Institution.

The State built a sea-wall around the head of the island in the early part of the last century, which was utterly destroyed in a very short time. It was rebuilt, the work commencing in 1836. The Commonwealth and the United States Government have finished and kept it in repair since. It is about fifteen hundred feet long, twelve feet wide, and fifteen feet high. Many of the larger stones weigh several tons.

In the tower of the main Institution building hangs a bell, weighing about three hundred pounds, which rings at stated periods during the day, making calls and recalls to officers and boys to and from various duties. It is supposed to have been obtained from the U. S. Government by the Congressman from this District. It has an indistinct inscription on its side; but, in an interesting correspondence with Secretary John D. Long, of the Navy Department, in April, 1897, the editor of *THE LEADER* was enabled to procure its history and the correct naming and spelling, which is as follows:—

*U.S. Str. Neshaminy.*

NAVY YARD, WASHINGTON, D.C.

1864.

The "Neshaminy" was built as a second-class frigate at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, and was launched October 5, 1864. This vessel was never completed, therefore never in commission. In 1867 her name was changed to "Nevada." She was sold in 1874.

No authentic record has yet been discovered of the gift of the bell to this Institution or of its purchase. The query now is, how did it get here? It is a singular co-incidence that while this History was in preparation a vessel named "Neshaminy," used as a coal-barge, should make its appearance here, and be anchored just off this Island. Is it possible that it was our old friend which once carried our bell?

RAINSFORD ISLAND,

BOSTON HARBOR,

NOVEMBER, 1915.

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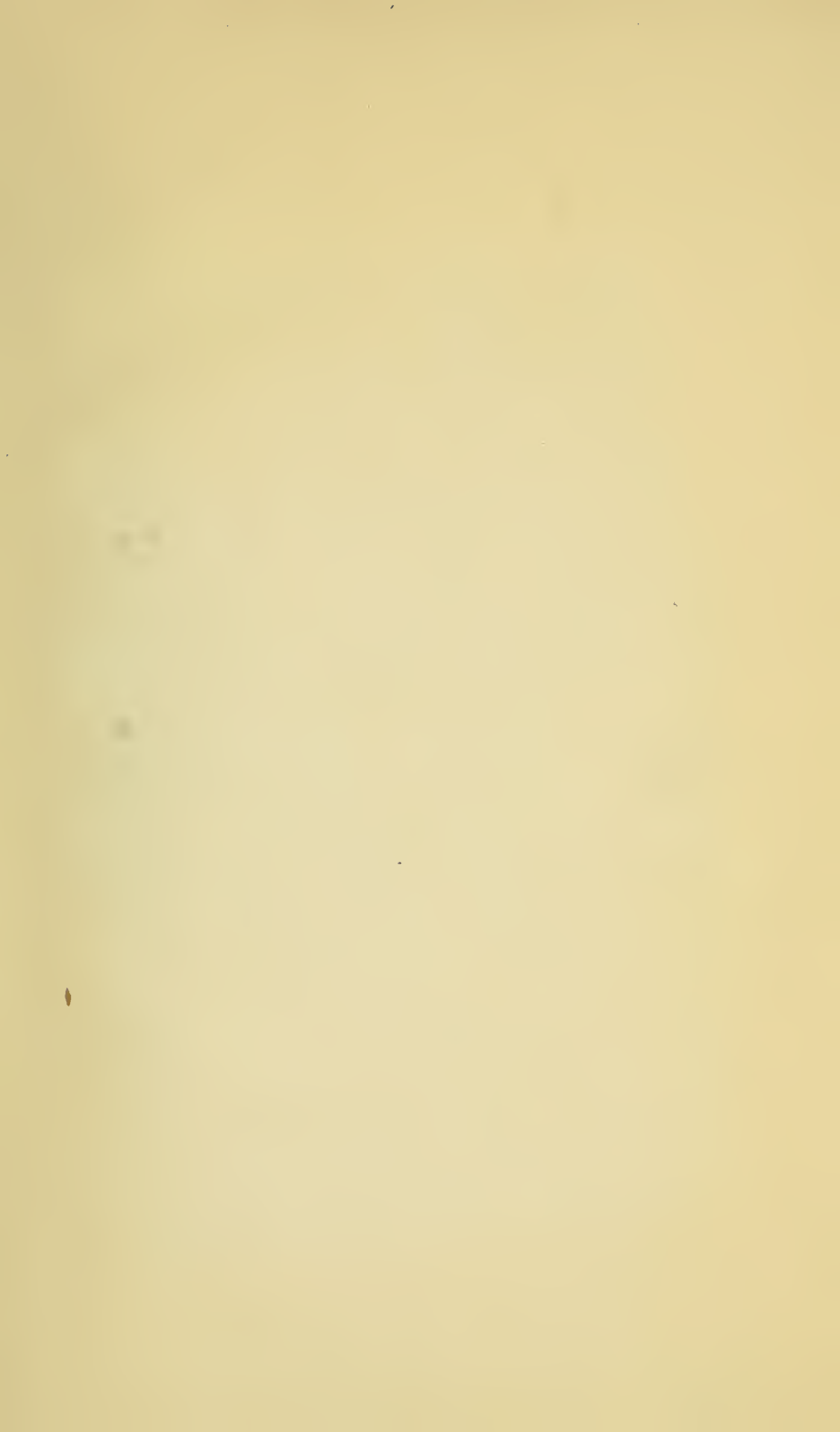


S. S. for B., Rainsford.

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